

# Fireworks memorial honors paratrooper, raises money for wounded warriors

by Sgt. Susan Wilt

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OIL CITY, Pa. — Like a lot of high school and college students, Erick Foster spent his summers working in the family business. It wasn't a typical family business though. Foster, an Army captain who was killed in Iraq on Aug. 29, 2007, spent his summer months doing what most teenage boys would consider a dream job — putting on fireworks shows.

"When Erick told me that he spent summers with his uncle driving around in a fireworks truck, I looked at him and said 'Now that's crazy,'" said 1st Sgt. Robert Ochsner, who served as Foster's first sergeant while they were in Iraq with Troop A, 1st Squadron, 73rd Cavalry Regiment, 82nd Airborne Division.

"But, he always told me how he enjoyed it," Ochsner said.

Closing in on the year anniversary of Foster's death, his family paid tribute to him and his past work experience with fireworks by holding the Captain Erick M. Foster Memorial Fireworks Exhibition, on Aug. 22, in Oil City, Pa., where Foster is buried.

"This pyro-musical extravaganza is perfect to celebrate Erick," Ochsner said during his speech at the exhibition. "It is just like him, it'll be loud and boisterous."

The exhibition featured five different firework companies and drew in more than 8,000 people. The companies were asked to come out and each put on a 20 minute musical fireworks display by Foster's uncle, Bob Kellner the owner of Kellner's fireworks. The Kellners were the main planners of the event.

"Everyone in the fireworks industry knows about this," said Lou and Donna Fillippio, of Chesterfrank,



Foster

Pa.

"If you're in fireworks then you know about the Captain Foster Memorial," said Lou, a pyro-techno artist. The Fillippios, who drove five and a half hours to see the event, have known the Kellners for years through the fireworks industry.

The event raised more than \$50,000 for the Wounded Warrior Project, a foundation that provides help, care and support to Soldiers who were wounded in combat.

Foster, who lived in Oil City until he was 15, had a soft spot for the Wounded Warrior Project after he visited Spc. Bobby LaMarche last July. LaMarche was one of his paratroopers who was wounded in Iraq.

"When Erick was here at that time he commented on how he was really gung-ho about the Wounded Warrior Project and that they had really been helping Bobby a lot," said Foster's aunt, Beth Kellner.

LaMarche, who is still receiving treatment for his wounds, was one of the guest speakers at the event. During his speech he mentioned how shocked he was that Foster came to visit him.

"I was in physical therapy learning how to live my life in a wheelchair, when my physical therapist looked at me and said 'I think you have a guest,'" said LaMarche, an Escanaba, Mich., native. "I looked up and to my surprise there was Captain Foster standing there. The only thing I could say was 'Holy cow sir, what are you doing here?'"

LaMarche, who received a standing ovation when he got up to speak, still can't believe that Foster took his time to visit him while he was briefly home from Iraq.

"His memory kept me going. You can really tell what a great person he was. He took time out while he was on his trip home to visit family, to visit me and that right there kept me going," said LaMarche, who is now walking with a cane despite being told he would never

walk again.

LaMarche wasn't the only one to praise Foster's generosity.

"He was always a 'count on me' kind of guy," said Matt Laverde, Foster's best friend growing up and a volunteer at the exhibition. "The guy to cover my paper route while I was on vacation was 'Spunk.' The guy who mowed my lawns while I was away, was 'Spunk.'"

Spunk, short for "Spunky," was a nickname that Laverde's older brothers gave Foster.

"He had that spunk. He was the littlest guy and would throw his body at the biggest guy (while playing football) and still get up smiling," said Laverde, now the head football coach at Oil City High School.

"He was very protective over us," said Beth, referring to her and her older sister Abby.

Although Foster has passed on, the legacy of his



Paratroopers from the Troop A, 1st Squadron, 73rd Cavalry Regiment, 2nd Brigade Combat Team, 82nd Airborne Division, color guard watch the firework display from Garden State Fireworks during the Captain Erick M. Foster Memorial Fireworks Exhibition in Oil City, Pa. Aug. 22. The exhibition was to help raise money for the Wounded Warrior Project.

dependability, outgoing personality and friendship has become well-known

whether it's in the fireworks industry, around the small

town, or even in the lessons a high school coach gives his team.

"I always talk about things like selfless service,

integrity, and discipline," Laverde said. "He's the perfect model and example.

You can't say a bad word about him."

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